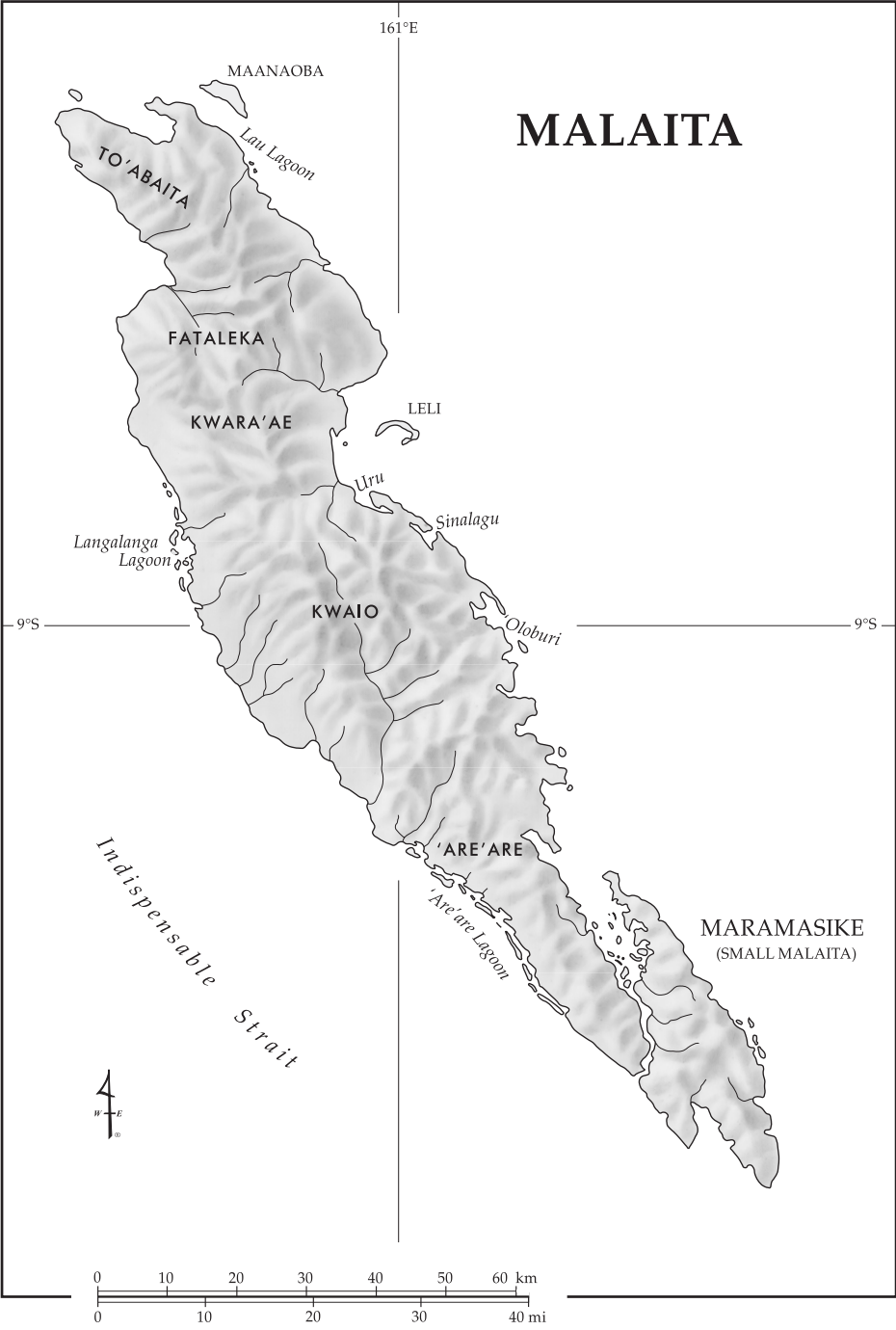


*Compensation and the Melanesian State:
Why the Kwaio Keep Claiming*

David Akin

As Melanesia enters the new millennium, what role will local cultural and political institutions play in the region's young nation states? This is a contentious issue as diverse tribal groups attempt to renegotiate their relationships with state governments. Many of them are attempting to employ indigenous social models and concepts to restructure those relationships into ones predicated more on political equality. For example, Andrew Strathern has reported New Guinea Highlanders behaving toward a local government branch as if it were a rival clan, demanding compensation from it and thereby "nullifying hierarchy" (1994, 64; see also Zuckerman 1981). Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington have found Chambri employing compensation in a similar way, holding the state responsible for actions of its employees and their families even when those actions are unrelated to their government duties (1991, 169–185).¹ Nancy Lutkehaus has told of Manam Islanders welcoming a visiting prime minister with a ceremony that cast him as a traditional trading partner, hoping to thereby "transform him into an equal" (1991). Robert Foster (1998, 83) summarized Jeffrey Clark's (1997) portrayal of Melanesians who imagine the Papua New Guinea state "as a classic Melanesian 'big man' whom they follow *if and only if* the big man remains bound by moral obligations of reciprocity and redistribution" (Foster's emphasis). As these various indigenous models are employed in novel and evolving contexts within particular histories, their meanings are transformed. This paper explores this process in relation to one institution, compensation, among one group of Melanesians, people of Malaita, the most populous island in the southeastern Solomons (map 1).

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MAP I.

Melanesians are rapidly broadening their use of compensation. Claims are no longer confined to local-level disputes; with growing frequency, people demand payments from governments, corporations, and other external entities. The targets of these innovative claims and other analysts commonly evaluate them using primarily economic or legalistic conceptions of compensation. Yet those pressing the claims often seek more than simple monetary recompense. As is true in more strictly local disputes, claimants often employ compensation in these cases to address broader aspects of their relationships with targeted groups, and understanding their actions requires deeper historical and social analysis of those relationships. To interpret such cases any investigation must be expanded to include issues beyond those explicitly addressed in formal claims (see Filer 1990, 1997; Kirsch 1997; Strathern 1981; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1997).

In the years since Solomon Islands independence in 1978, Malaitans have presented the central government with numerous compensation claims regarding issues ranging over historical events, timber and mining, and interethnic disputes. The main ethnographic focus here will be one series of such claims originating in the eastern Kwaio region of central Malaita. The Kwaio mountains are home to the last Solomons population still practicing their ancestral religion, while a larger group of Kwaio Christians lives in large villages on the coast. Throughout the 1980s, Kwaio made highly publicized demands for compensation for the outrages of a 1927 government punitive expedition, launched after the assassination of District Officer William Bell and most of his party while they were trying to collect Kwaio guns and taxes (Keesing and Corris 1980). This campaign for government compensation has received wide support across Kwaio within both traditionalist and Christian communities, and was for several years the main focus of local *kastom* political activities (ie, activities framed in terms of empowering local traditions).² Although payment has not been forthcoming, many Kwaio vow to continue pursuing their claim.

The larger Kwaio community is deeply and multiply divided on most political issues, and the question arises of why the idea of demanding compensation in this case has been so compelling for so many people. Here I approach this problem from several perspectives, examining fundamental Malaitan ideas about compensation, meanings that compensation has acquired through its role in Malaitan political and church history, and contemporary local perspectives on government and development. Only by

considering these together can one understand the meanings compensation has come to have and, more specifically, why claiming “the Bell compensation” has had such tremendous appeal for Kwaio as a way to approach the state.

The paper also addresses how Malaitans more generally perceive the state and their island’s future status within the nation. Many Malaitans see the government as a political adversary, and they continue to interact with it using strategies and concepts once employed to resist British colonial administrations. Particularly important here are political philosophies based around Malaitan variants of the concept of *kastom*, especially conceptions of “*kastom* chiefs” (see White and Lindstrom 1997) and “*kastom* law.” These and related *kastom* concepts have been far from stable, however, and since the 1930s their meanings have continually changed with the shifting character of the Solomons government and its relationship to Solomon Islanders. This is particularly so regarding compensation, which, as I shall show, has long been a key symbol within Malaitan identity and resistance ideologies.

Understanding Malaitan compensation and its modern meanings has recently become a more pressing matter for Solomon Islanders. In 1989 and 1996 the capital, Honiara, was paralyzed by riots as Malaitans extorted large compensation payments from the government for insults made against their island, and similar confrontations are likely in the future. The paper concludes with a discussion of how my analysis of the Kwaio claims can also throw light on these urban clashes. But first, the Bell compensation.

THE ASSASSINATION OF BELL AND THE GOVERNMENT’S REVENGE

During the 1910s and 1920s the British pushed to gain control over the southeastern Solomons by installing a network of district officers commanding small constabularies and enforcing a male head tax (photo 1). By far their most concerted opposition came from Malaitans, but in the decade before 1927, William Bell enjoyed dramatic success in imposing pax Britannica there. By that year, only eastern Kwaio still resisted the government, and Bell was aggressively confronting Kwaio warriors by enforcing the tax and confiscating their rifles. His assassination and the government punitive expedition that followed have been well documented by the late Roger Keesing and historian Peter Corris in their book *Lightning*



PHOTO 1. The visiting high commissioner reviews the native constabulary at Tulagi golf course, with Bell in attendance, in 1927, not long before the attack at Sinalagu. (The original caption was “The soldiers who guard and defend us.”) (Courtesy of Andrea Bannatyne and the British Museum of Mankind)

Meets the West Wind (1980) and I summarize them here only as they pertain directly to my analysis of the Kwaio compensation claims.

The surprise attack at the October 1927 tax collection was planned and executed primarily by men of three kin groups inland from Sinalagu Harbour and did not involve most Kwaio. Bell, fourteen of his party, and two Kwaio attackers died. Most of the dead were soldiers from northern Malaita. Two weeks later a government force consisting of fifty Australian soldiers, twenty-eight white civilians, and some fifty Malaitan police and volunteers primarily from the north, arrived in Kwaio aboard HMAS *Adelaide*. The Europeans were ineffective in the rugged terrain, but the Malaitan police, skilled jungle fighters, had a field day. As Keesing and Corris described it, “desecration, garden destroying, shooting pigs and burning houses were diversions. The order of the day was people hunting. . . . Whatever orders they received from above, their mission was to avenge Bell and, most of all, their own slain relatives” (1980, 166). Women and girls were gang-raped and many were shot, children were murdered, and prisoners were routinely executed and their bodies mutilated. Most of the victims had played no part in the attack on Bell’s party. Soldiers assaulted not only Sinalagu area communities but also those behind

neighboring Uru Harbour, parts of the 'Oloburi area, and even across the central mountains into western Kwaio. They met virtually no armed resistance. Keesing and Corris estimated that some sixty people were shot, and many children died of exposure while hiding in the jungle. The soldiers systematically desecrated ancestral shrines and sacred men's houses, and Kwaio believe this provoked angry spirits to kill more descendants later through illness and mishap. About two hundred men, most of them innocent of any crime, were jailed in Tulagi, where thirty-one soon died in a prison dysentery epidemic. Six were hanged and seventeen sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

These calamities set a tone for Kwaio relations with outsiders that persists today. In the eyes of many in the Solomons, "the Bell massacre" certified the character of all Kwaio as villainous savages, innately primitive, treacherous, and violent, and Kwaio continue to be feared and reviled by many Solomon Islanders and Europeans on plantations and in towns. Kwaio themselves generally distrust outsiders. Memories of the punitive expedition's outrages are fresh, and elders emotionally recount narratives of atrocities committed against their families, homes, and ancestors. Younger people have listened to such accounts throughout their lives, and these historical events are at the heart of modern Kwaio identity. When younger Kwaio friends met my wife in 1992 they took their first opportunity alone with her to try to explain who they, the Kwaio, were. They began by recounting the horrors of the 1927 attack and the government's cruel response.

The animosity and distrust produced by these events have contributed significantly to the Kwaio mountains being the least developed area of the Solomons. The government provides no services there and, relative to other Solomon Islanders, the people make little effort to integrate with the rest of the country. They are typically perceived to be conservative, isolationist, and confrontational, and there is a large element of truth in this. Certainly the most common Kwaio stance toward government over the years has been one of defiance. And yet, most Kwaio desire greater participation in the larger world, and want certain kinds of development, education, and medical care for their communities and children (see Akin 1994). They have communicated these wishes to the government since at least the 1940s, though often in association with demands for more political autonomy. As I shall show, Kwaio ambivalence toward the government and their own place in the greater Solomons is key to understanding their current compensation demands.

PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE KWAIO CLAIMS

The Kwaio compensation claims have generated considerable commentary. They have been portrayed as cynical political manipulations (Daubo 1984; Fifi'i 1989; Keesing 1992, 157–158ff), as nonsensical and ill-conceived (Keesing 1983; 1986), and as instigated by irresponsible anthropologists and Peace Corps volunteers ('Isika 1984; *Pacific Islands Monthly* 1985, 53; Wintle 1988, 232–243). Most attention has focused on three aspects of the issue that I believe have precluded an accurate assessment of the claims. I now briefly summarize these and explain why they are not central to my own analysis.

First, the Keesing and Corris book (1980) sparked tremendous controversy. It informed many Solomon Islanders for the first time of the punitive expedition's brutality. Some blamed the book for kindling Kwaio anger and provoking their compensation demands and called for it to be banned. Others even accused Keesing of personally organizing or instigating Kwaio actions, and he felt compelled to defend himself and the book against these charges in newspapers, radio interviews, and academic publications (eg, 1983; 1986; 1990; 1992).

I was living in Kwaio throughout much of the period when people were formulating their original claims (1979–1983), and in no way was Keesing involved. Kwaio neither read his book nor showed much interest in it. Suggestions that I and my former wife were responsible for the Kwaio demands are equally baseless and fatuous (eg, Freed quoted in Wintle 1988, 235). Unlike other Solomon Islanders, Kwaio had never forgotten the atrocities of 1927 and they needed no outside encouragement to pursue compensation.

A second sensationalized feature of this controversy has been the astronomical sum of money demanded in the most publicized claim, over S1\$300 billion. Nearly everything written on the topic emphasizes the absurdity of this amount, often using it to discredit the very idea of a Kwaio claim. However, only one person calculated this figure, a secretary to the "paramount chief" of the local *kastom* political council, described later. It bore little relation to the goals or expectations of the Kwaio men and women seeking compensation, for whom such a figure was meaningless (compare Filer 1990, 96).

Third, this same paramount chief, Folofolu, was able to capitalize on frustration over government inaction regarding the claim to foment a boycott of national elections. This provoked a serious political crisis and

a violent clash with police in 1986 at a Sinalagu polling station. The confrontation was primarily blamed on the Kwaio compensation demands not having been met, and the claim itself was widely represented by outsiders as a provocative and militant act. But most Kwaio who had worked toward filing the compensation claims did not take part in the incident, and of those who did, most had not been seeking confrontation when they developed their claims. On the contrary, as I shall explain, many Kwaio hoped compensation might inaugurate a new era of more peaceful coexistence and perhaps even beneficial cooperation with the government.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COMPENSATION CLAIMS

By the late 1970s (long before publication of Keesing and Corris's book) several parties were floating the idea of submitting a compensation claim for the punitive expedition's actions. While it is not clear where the idea originated, at least some early proposals were made by government-educated Christians. Kwaio Member of Parliament Jonathan Fifi'i made inquiries with British government representatives while he was in England in 1977, and claims were later suggested by a young political activist in Honiara and by a government council member (Fifi'i 1988 personal communication; Keesing 1992, 158).

The claim was also a regular topic at gatherings of the eastern Kwaio political council, called the *Fadanga* (or "meeting"). By 1981 communities throughout the mountains, only loosely coordinated by the *Fadanga*, began compiling lists of offenses committed in their areas by the soldiers. For example, the following claim was voiced in 1982 by Ruita, an elderly survivor of the punitive expedition, and recorded by his nephew. Ruita, now deceased, was from the 'Ai'eda territory, home of the warrior Basiana who organized and led the attack on Bell's party.

I, Ruita, am the priest for all of the shrines at 'Ai'eda, and Waneagea is the chief over the land at 'Ai'eda. During the time of our grandparents, the living was good. Then in 1927 the law destroyed our way of living. You Government, you climbed up here with your army and you destroyed my place of 'Ai'eda! Your army climbed up and shot ten people here! Twenty people died in all. A second thing of mine they spoiled, they raped the women here! Third, they desecrated my shrines, my thirty shrines of 'Ai'eda! Fourth, they destroyed thirty sacred pigs here. Fifth, you burned forty houses! Sixth, the six sacred ritual bundles of my place of 'Ai'eda were burned! Seventh, they

destroyed forty taro gardens! And fifty sacred taro of mine they spoiled! Eighth, they burned two sets of slit-gongs! Ninth, they burned the sacred pan-pipes! And there were twenty sacred dance sticks! Tenth, there were forty carved pudding bowls they ruined. Eleventh, they set fire to the menstrual huts and the smoke rose above our tabu places. They destroyed my living! (Recorded in the Kwaio language; my translation).

Many claims were simply lists of people killed and items destroyed. The general idea was that they would all be presented together to officials in Honiara, who would then either negotiate compensation directly with the Kwaio or help the Kwaio obtain payment from England. In the early 1980s most Kwaio made only hazy distinctions between the Solomon Islands and late British administrations. Some, however, recognized in the country's new independence a significant political transition and an opportunity to reformulate relations with the government. This is likely the most significant factor in why Kwaio chose this particular historical moment to pursue their claims, after more than fifty years of silent resentment.

In 1984 a Kwaio delegation formally presented typed copies of the lists to the government in Honiara (*Solomon Star*, 22 June). Paramount Chief Folofo'u and his clerk (both now deceased) controlled calculation of the amount demanded and orchestrated its presentation. Although most Kwaio strongly supported making some claim, Folofo'u decided how this particular effort would proceed, skillfully using prohibitive religious curses to stifle dissent. This is important because Folofo'u's claim and its outcome received the attention of commentators and the press. Most of the original lists of damage were compiled by individual bush kin groups, not by "Christian scribes" (Keesing 1990, 292) or by Folofo'u and his clerk (Fifi'i 1989, 157–158; Keesing 1992, 160–161). It was, by and large, a popular project propelled by highly motivated mountain pagans. Their perspectives, which were lost in the political turmoil, are what most concern me in this paper.

Subsequent inaction by the Solomon Islands Government enabled Folofo'u to organize a Kwaio boycott of the national elections, and over the next two years government officials met with him and various delegations to seek a settlement. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1985) presented the claim to the British High Commissioner, but London refused to consider it, citing the length of time that had passed and asserting that the punitive expedition was "a lawful action" (British High Commission 1985). At least once, a token sum of money was proffered by the Solomons govern-

ment, and several times high officials suggested that clinics or development projects be located in Kwaio in lieu of a monetary payment. All offers were refused.

Matters came to a head in 1986, when the government tried to force the long-delayed election by opening polling places under armed guard. Under Folofu'u's direction several men used force to disrupt voting at Sinalagu Harbour, sparking a violent confrontation with heavily armed riot police that nearly ended in disaster. Afterward, many people declared that Folofu'u had almost provoked another tragedy like that of 1927, and his credibility crumbled. Nevertheless, by mid-1987 people had started putting together a new and more moderate compensation claim, pointedly barring Folofu'u's participation. People refused his calls to meetings, and he died relatively powerless in early 1992.³

Currently, compensation demands occupy a political back burner while Kwaio leaders pursue government ratification of a code of *kastom* laws and compensations that they seek to enforce locally (see Akin 1993, 514–553). Nevertheless, the claim will certainly resurface as a key political issue, and many consider compensation payment a prerequisite for future cooperation with the government.

RUDIMENTS OF KWAIO COMPENSATION

To analyze the Bell compensation claims one must understand several general themes fundamental to Malaitan compensation and how they are being played out on the national political stage. Kwaio recognize six distinct named types of compensation: for sexual trespass, theft, desecrating someone's ancestors, insults or infringements of personal or group rights, causing injury, and causing death. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and people may demand more than one kind of compensation for a single act. The punitive expedition committed all of these types of offenses, and compensation has been demanded for them all, but here I summarize only compensation for death and desecration. The murders and religious defilement by the punitive expedition are emphasized most by the Kwaio when discussing why the government must compensate them. I also outline some broader liability concepts particularly relevant to this claim.

When a person's actions result in another's death, compensation called *firitaa* must be paid to the deceased's family. In many situations this must

be done regardless of intent or, in some contexts, even of negligence. To give a classic Melanesian example, if a Kwaio person suffers a fatal fall on the way to a feast, the sponsors of the feast must pay death compensation, despite the fact that individuals are never personally invited to Kwaio feasts. The explicit logic is that if the hosts had not held the event, the person would not have been walking where the mishap occurred. The hosts are also responsible for any other misfortunes that occur at, or in consequence of, the feast. This and related notions of causality and liability have often seemed unfair or illogical to foreign observers.

This is not to say that Kwaio are unconcerned with intent, which is critically important in decisions about how much death compensation to demand. Sometimes roundabout ways are found to return all or part of the payment if there was clearly no culpability or negligence. For instance, the family might ask a blameless payer to bury the deceased, for which service they would give a large payment. What is important in such cases is that the compensator recognizes the survivors' right to receive appropriate compensation. The payment constitutes a public acknowledgment and enactment of social equality (compare Goldman 1993).

Intentional murder is another matter entirely and requires a much different response. Most important here is that, not only must living relatives receive compensation in murder cases, but payment is also required by the ancestral spirits that were propitiated by the victim (and also the victim's own spirit). The family of the deceased will sacrifice pigs to each spirit, pigs that the murderers or their kin should contribute or pay for. If this very expensive procedure is not followed, the ancestors will punish their descendants for any subsequent social intercourse with the killers or their close kin. Ancestral anger will subside only after those responsible pay the *wergild* or someone is killed in revenge.

If a death compensation remains unsettled, ancestors may continue to prohibit their descendants from socializing with the murderer's descendants even into future generations. As an example, in 1982 the proposed location for a locally run school had to be changed because of an uncompensated killing two generations before. The schoolteacher was descended from the victim, and the site was on land of the murderer's descendants. People feared that the teacher's ancestors would kill or otherwise harm him if he resided there.

A different sort of compensation, *siunga* (literally "washing"), must be given to ritually purify ancestors when their prescriptive or proscriptive

behavioral rules are violated or when they or their shrines are desecrated. When a person angers another's ancestors, that person must pay for the sacrificial pigs to compensate and "wash" the spirit. The spirit will hold only its own descendants accountable for the infraction, but they, in turn, hold the violator accountable. Thus *siunga* often is collected, initially, as a secular compensation and then converted into sacrificial pigs to compensate ancestors.⁴ For accidental desecrations most Kwaio consider it improper to demand more compensation than is needed to buy these pigs. Intentional desecrations (like those of the punitive expedition) are a different matter; much more is always required to cleanse the insult to both the living descendants and the spirits. The living will demand additional payment if it is determined that angry ancestors have already inflicted misfortunes on them as a consequence of the desecration.

To understand these and other Kwaio compensation transactions it is crucial to appreciate their inherently dual nature. Demanding compensation is simultaneously an act of aggression and of reconciliation. When relatives of an injured party descend on a hamlet to demand compensation they may be heavily armed and belligerent. The compensation is sometimes "negotiated" under explicit threats of violence by the claimants, which hamlet residents and their allies may reciprocate. If the claims are rejected outright claimants might attack someone in the hamlet or go on a rampage of property destruction. Nevertheless, the usual goal of those claiming compensation, particularly death compensation, is not only to assert their rights and strength, but also to restore some social stability and at least a semblance of peaceful coexistence with the party of the offender.

Most compensation negotiations do not end in violence. Indeed, principals in the dispute may be absent, represented by relatives uninvolved in the events at issue. Negotiations often take place between older people working to correct a problem caused by impetuous younger kin. Yet, even here, the threat of violence (if satisfactory payment is not forthcoming) is at least implicit in the proceedings. Because of this, compensation discussions often are tense, and participants sometimes are unsure whether all will culminate in speeches of friendship or a violent brawl. One thing is certain: until compensation is offered and accepted, normal relations between the groups will be impossible. I have more to say about this aspect of compensation later.

Kwaio conceptions of ancestral death compensation must be understood in order to comprehend the tenacity of ongoing claims against the

government. When discussing the punitive expedition's impact, people generally focus on how the soldiers disrupted local relations with ancestors through their killings and desecrations. Kwaio believe that this has caused a steady decline in the quality of their lives since 1927. They believe their ancestors remain angry because the expedition's crimes were never compensated. This idea is not new; as early as 1939 a district officer reported Kwaio openly blaming community problems on ancestral anger over the punitive expedition, and this belief was surely current immediately after the attack as well (Akin 1993, 230–234). Many Kwaio maintain that initiation of better relations will be impossible unless the government pays a sizable compensation for the ancestors to see. This is one reason why they reject government offers of development projects instead of monetary compensation. While government officials hope to avoid appearances of paying compensation, for many Kwaio the act of public payment is more important than the money itself.

COMPENSATION IN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Most Kwaio want more than simple compensation for the outrages of 1927. By their claims they are demanding that the government recognize compensation itself as a proper means of resolving serious disputes, and, by extension, their right to manage their own legal affairs. Compensation has acquired for Kwaio and other Malaitans tremendous political significance beyond its legal role. To understand this it is necessary to revisit past judicial policies of colonial and postcolonial governments, and of Malaita's Christian churches.

Most Malaitans ignored European laws during the first decades of colonial rule except when laboring abroad, but by 1928 the entire island was under British control. In the years that followed, colonial officers worked with very limited success to devise and enforce a workable Malaitan legal policy. Through the 1930s, most Malaitans were ambivalent about the new "government law." While many welcomed the end of blood feuding, others wished to return to settling their own disputes, through force if necessary, and British law became widely resented as an alien imposition. One of Ian Hogbin's north Malaitan informants, a former warrior, explained this to him in 1933: "You are familiar with the Law. It belongs to you: It comes from the place where you were born. For us the Law is different. In olden times we behaved as our fathers did

before us. When you have asked me in our conversations together, why did I do that, have I not replied, 'It is the custom; my fathers did it of old?' To-day that is changed. The white man has come and tells us we must behave like *his* father. Our own fathers, we must forget them" (Anin-gari in Hogbin 1970, 153).

Many Malaitans were furious at the British prohibition of killing to punish serious moral transgressions, particularly adultery, and also at the lack of attention British officers were giving to compensation. Bita Saetana (Peter Satan) served briefly as a government appointed "chief" at Sinalagu in the mid-1940s and recalled to me in 1981 how Kwaio observed the government courts with dismay: "Under the government before, if you discovered who had stolen your pig you wouldn't get any compensation. 'Take him to jail for two months.' Somebody committed adultery with your wife and it was found out? 'You go to jail for just a year. Or six months. You can't compensate with shell money.' That's something that was making our people very angry in those days."

But in fact government courts did recognize the legitimacy of some compensation payments. Officers from Bell onward realized that compensation was absolutely necessary for maintaining peace on Malaita. Yet there were difficulties. How would officers treat compensation demands for acts that were not criminal under British law? Would Malaitans be allowed to settle serious crimes with compensation alone? Was it double jeopardy for a community to make a person pay compensation who was also sentenced to jail by the government? How could district officers assure proper distribution of compensations awarded in their courts when they did not understand the complex social networks, histories, or subtle principles involved?

The government responded with several strategies, all unsatisfactory to most Malaitans. One was the adoption of a category of "custom law" to use to settle disputes without invoking British criminal or civil law. Some officers found it best to handle as many disputes as possible as "custom cases," but the approach generated other difficulties. Malaitan culture, old or new, was an enigma to government officers. Their realization of their own cultural ignorance, combined with a severe shortage of European personnel (two British officers to some fifty thousand Malaitans scattered through rugged country), led them to delegate more legal authority to government-appointed headmen. This diminished the problem of arbitrator ignorance, but it granted judicial power to men who were sometimes

autocratic, prejudiced, and unscrupulous. The policy also weakened the legal roles of community leaders and generally undermined their authority.

A more fundamental problem for the policy of applying "custom law" in government courts was that it was predicated on an assumption that a timeless, enduring, and pre-European "native custom" existed that could be isolated and authenticated for legal purposes. This notion clashed with the reality that, by the 1930s, Malaitans had been interacting with Europeans for over sixty years, and local cultures had changed in ways unknown to district officers and even to most Malaitans.

Although some government officers did allow and even order compensation in their own and their headmen's courts, they did so in ways that angered many Malaitans. First, they commonly limited compensation in theft cases to the value of the stolen property. Malaitan theft compensations were usually several times the value of property taken, but the government rejected such punitive claims. District officers also ordered the return of any compensations obtained by threat of force and imprisoned those who collected them. Serious offenses, especially murder and assault, were always prosecuted as violations of British criminal law, and in such cases courts often ignored compensation or disallowed it. Officers often quashed compensation collected on the basis of indigenous principles of strict liability such as those discussed earlier. Finally, district officers often gave little or no consideration to evidence considered damning by Malaitans, while granting serious weight to testimony the community found irrelevant. G E D Sandars, who headed Malaita's administration for most of 1933–1946, commented, "What they consider proof, and in many cases they are probably right, cannot be accepted as evidence in court" (1937, 18).

More generally, Malaitans reacted negatively to the western tendency to treat disputes as simply dyadic in nature rather than as conflicts immersed in relations between groups, or episodes within long-term relationships. While Malaitans typically absorbed disputes within broader social networks, British law attempted to isolate them from the same. Lacking the social and cultural knowledge to distribute compensations to appropriate parties, district officers had little choice but to award them to individuals. For these and other reasons Kwaio and many other Malaitans found government courts, and particularly their approach to compensation, highly unsatisfactory, and they therefore settled disputes privately whenever they could.⁵

Through the 1930s and early 1940s colonial law became the dominant symbol of dissatisfaction with government rule throughout Malaita. In 1944 and 1945 this came to the fore with the rise of the Maasina Rule movement. Centered on Malaita, Maasina Rule eventually brought colonial administration to a standstill throughout much of the southeastern Solomons for several years. A paramount goal of the movement was the codification of “*kastom* law” and the formation of “*kastom* courts” to supplant the colonial legal system. Compensation was to be the primary means of settling disputes and punishing crimes, except that (most people advocated) murderers would be handed over to the government. Eventually the government imprisoned Maasina Rule’s leaders on charges stemming from their alleged operation of illegal courts.

After Maasina Rule was suppressed, the symbolic opposition of *kastom* law to government law remained a leading theme of ongoing Malaitan political resistance ideologies. Beginning in the 1950s, the government gradually increased the powers of its local-level courts, and compensation became more integrated into the legal system. Nonetheless, many of the complaints about courts just recounted continued to be heard, and nowhere more strongly than in eastern Kwaio. For many years Kwaio in the mountains selectively used the courts, only to reject them completely in the 1970s.

The period from 1979–1981 is important for understanding subsequent Kwaio demands for government compensation because at this time Kwaio began seriously formulating their claims. When I arrived on Malaita in 1979, the central issue dividing the government and the Kwaio remained the latter’s refusal to recognize the state legal system. Once again, the conflict was framed in terms of Kwaio compensation versus government punitive measures. This became the pivotal controversy through which Kwaio and government representatives argued the broader question of how to balance local autonomy with governmental authority.

In 1979 the Kwaio Fadanga council was allowing assault cases to be handled through compensation alone and was preventing government interference.⁶ From the government’s perspective this allowed dangerous criminals to buy their way out of punishment. Some officials expressed willingness to allow compensation if criminal penalties also were imposed, while others argued that inflicting compensations in addition to government sanctions was unfair. Many Kwaio rejected both stances with a similar double-jeopardy argument of their own, insisting that no one

should go to jail after having paid compensation. Most Kwaio were willing to allow the arrest of murderers, but more conservative antigovernment factions in the community wanted even killings handled internally, as a friend explained to me with a mock lecture to the government: "We don't like the way the government punishes murderers without any compensation. We could die if ancestors are not given pigs after a killing. You, government! This man didn't kill one of your relatives. So why do you want to take him? He killed *my* relative, so let me punish him so my anger will be finished. This man he killed wasn't even related to you" (Wa'ifurina 1982).

These legal issues, along with Kwaio refusal to pay taxes, prompted an unprecedented coastal visit to the area by Prime Minister Kenilorea in 1980. Although he hoped to convince Kwaio of the futility of resisting government law, his visit instead highlighted the opposition between government and Kwaio positions. Lecturing his audience about crime and punishment, Kenilorea explained that compensation was meant for individual victims, while prison terms and fines were punishment to compensate society as a whole. Both were important, but society's interests had to take precedence over those of individuals. Unimpressed, audience members informed him testily that compensation is divided among the relevant segments of society; others have no place being compensated when they have not been wronged.

This controversy has continued unresolved into the 1990s and Kwaio continue to exclude government courts from their mountains. Although violence is relatively rare, armed parties manage many serious disputes, demanding compensation according to indigenous principles. Intimidation is similarly used by Kwaio and other Malaitans to collect compensations in town. Of course, this is all highly illegal under government law, and in 1986 the Solomons chief justice warned that he would hand down severe sentences for offenders (whom he called "gangs of thugs"). In an ironic sanitizing of "custom" he declared, "Genuine requests for compensation must be settled by proper customary means through the chiefs or elders" (*Solomon Nius*, 20 Nov).

For all that, in practice the government has made little effort to interfere with internal Kwaio disputes. There is no government presence in the bush, and police are loath to go there, particularly to make arrests. On Malaita as a whole, in fact, government local courts have been little used since the 1980s. Instead, community-run "chiefs' courts" have applied

"*kastom* law" to hear most cases disputants cannot manage by themselves. For example, in 1988 police in the entire southern half of Malaita (Kwaio, 'Are'are, and Small Malaita) recorded only thirty reports of offenses. In 1986, local courts on the entire island, by then home to some seventy thousand people, reportedly heard a mere 104 cases. By comparison, during the previous year local courts in the country's Western Province, with a much smaller population, heard 901 cases (Naitoro 1990, 21). After residing on Malaita from 1995–1997, my impression is that more recent statistics would be even more striking. Most Malaitans continue to perceive local courts much as they were described in 1985 by 'Are'are parliamentarian and lawyer (and son of Maasina Rule's founder) Andrew Nori, as "foreign creatures dressed in local costumes" (*Solomon Star*, nd).

COMPENSATION AND CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

In many respects Kwaio society is polarized between mountain pagans and coastal Christians (see Akin 1993; Keesing 1989; 1992). One contentious issue that divides them is that the area's two largest churches prohibit members from paying or receiving compensation. While many Christians have supported the claims against the government, those most active in formulating and making them have been pagans. An important motivation for many of these pagans is that, if the government pays, it will be a symbolic blow to those Christian leaders who oppose compensation as a means of settling disputes.

This controversy dates back nearly one hundred years in the Solomons. The first church to spread throughout Malaita was the South Sea Evangelical Mission founded by Australian missionaries and their Malaitan converts. The mission's leaders preached that true conversion required radical abandonment of indigenous cultures and adoption of a church-prescribed Christian lifestyle. They sought to overthrow local political structures and replace them with a loose network of church-trained "teachers." To this end, they attacked not only the ancestral religions but also the legal and economic institutions through which local leaders exercised their power, particularly brideprice and compensation payments.

Today in Kwaio members of both the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC) and its rival, the Seventh Day Adventists, are taught that they must forgo compensation. Instead, Christians should forgive each other for wrongs, sometimes through ritual reconciliation involving public confes-

sions (see Westermarck 1987). This mirrors their relationship with God: in contrast to the ancestral system, Christians who break religious rules need not sacrifice compensatory pigs, but only confess and pray for God's forgiveness. The SSEC also has a long history of fierce resistance to government control, and this "harmony ideology" evolved partly to minimize both government and pagan interference in Christian disputes (see Nader 1990).

Most Kwaio Christians conceptually differentiate sacred "God's law" from secular "church law," but boundaries tend to be ambiguous and people often are unsure where particular rules fall. Some Christians perceive every violation of church policy as a religious infraction and therefore treat payment of compensation as an offense punishable by God. A case from my field notes illustrates problems such ambiguity can trigger:

In 1980 a teenage boy propositioned a girl in their SSEC village. When she reported this to her relatives the boy struck her. Three of the girl's relatives, two pagans and one Christian, demanded compensation, for both the proposition and the assault. The boy's father reluctantly paid three shell money valuables and S\$10. Six weeks later the boy's infant cousin died. Several Christians declared the baby's death God's punishment for the compensation payment. The baby's family announced their refusal to bury the corpse until the recipients of the previous compensation paid *them* a death compensation of five shell valuables. During negotiations, the father who had paid the original compensation had to be restrained from attacking with a machete the pagans who had claimed it. Church leaders met and decided that no compensation should be paid for the infant's death because first, the prohibition against paying sexual compensation was not God's law but rather church law, so God had not killed the baby as punishment; and second, collecting death compensation *was* against God's law because "none was paid for the death of Jesus."

Compensation disputes with pagans are common, particularly when Christians charged with offenses refuse to compensate their pagan accusers. However, although pagans and Christians sometimes use the compensation issue against each other as a blunt rhetorical weapon, in practice compensation remains controversial even in Christian communities. Many otherwise pious Christians pay and collect compensations despite continual admonishments, and sometimes church expulsions, by conservative church leaders. Church authorities throughout Malaita find compensation prohibitions to be among their most difficult rules to enforce (see eg, Burt 1994,

237–238; Kwa'io'loa and Burt 1997, 111–112, 153). Given these ongoing conflicts over compensation within the churches, and the deeply rooted antigovernment sentiments of the Christian community, it is little surprise that the claims against the government have received support from so many Kwaio Christians, even though many pagans perceived them as having an anti-Christian component.

The tenacity of the practice of compensation in the face of both government legal pressures and Christian doctrines reflects, in part, a common Malaitan ethnopsychological conception that compensation is more than merely an alternative means of dispute resolution. It is often portrayed in a naturalistic way: dangerous negative emotions are inevitably aroused when one is seriously wronged, and these can *only* be assuaged by compensation or, alternatively, direct retribution. From this perspective, wrongs cannot truly be righted by simple forgiveness, or government-imposed fines or imprisonment (see Schieffelin 1985; Strathern 1993, 218–227; White 1985).

COMPENSATION, EQUIVALENCE, AND AMBIVALENCE IN GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

I noted in my introduction that the Kwaio case exemplifies a broader pattern in postcolonial Melanesia of tribal groups attempting to reformulate their relationships with young state governments. I have shown that on Malaita the right to political equality with, and autonomy from, the government has long been a central theme in *kastom* political ideologies. The Kwaio demands for government compensation for the 1927 punitive expedition are a vigorous assertion of these rights, superseding the passive Kwaio resistance to government control that typified the final decades of colonial rule. The Kwaio claims aim to settle more than the crimes of 1927; they seek to employ the issue to establish a new association with the government that will allow them to retain their independence, but also afford them access to government channels to power and wealth.

For Kwaio, the compensation demands are ideal for pursuing this political agenda for two reasons. The most obvious is the political meaning compensation itself has acquired since the 1920s. Throughout Malaita the government's reluctance to permit its application as in the past, and insistence on the primacy of western-style judicial punishments for serious offenses, propelled compensation to prominence as a marker of legal

autonomy and political legitimacy. Therefore the demand that the government *itself* pay compensation to *the Kwaio* is ironic and, for Kwaio, compelling.

This irony is compounded because the 1927 punitive expedition was the historical moment at which the government first imposed its law. Indeed, Bell's clash with the warrior who killed him, Basiana, has become a potent metaphor for conflicts between government law and Kwaio law. Ma'aanamae, a leader in the movement to claim compensation (but opposed to Paramount Chief Folofu'u's activities) presented this to me in 1980:

That's how the killing [of Bell] happened, because he tried to bring his own law here and use it to put an end to *kastom* law. Then government came again and arrested Basiana and others who killed and took them away and hung them. The government wanted *kastom* to be finished. And Basiana, he had wanted the government to be finished. That's what the two of them were thinking. And that is why the two of them killed each other, why they took Basiana and hung him. But how is *kastom* going to be finished? It's still here today. And the law, even though they killed Mister Bell, how is it going to be finished? It's still here. So although the law stands today, so, too, does *kastom* stand today. They wanted it to be finished, but no.⁷

By paying compensation the government would not only redress the wrongs of the punitive expedition. For Kwaio, payment would also constitute a resounding public acknowledgment of their right to employ compensation and "*kastom* law" more generally to manage their own legal affairs.

The second reason the compensation demand is well suited for approaching the government is that the act of demanding compensation embodies for Kwaio the very tensions present in their own stances toward government. As I have shown, ambivalence is intrinsic to compensation interactions within local Kwaio disputes. A claim can be simultaneously an aggressive demand for public recognition of status and rights and also a proposal for normalized relations. And, as I've noted, Kwaio views of government also tend to be ambivalent and even contradictory. While opposing government control, most Kwaio also recognize their own marginalization in the Solomons. For all the Kwaio reputation for fierce resistance, in the past fifty years the government has made few direct threats against them. The main government response to their defiance has been

to ignore them. Consequently, one finds in the mountains no government schools, medical services, or development projects, and few Kwaio from there hold positions of influence in the government or in business abroad. Devotion to ancestors and commitment to local autonomy often clash with growing desires for foreign things and political engagement. Although much *kastom* rhetoric is passionately defiant and isolationist (eg, Akin 1996; Keesing 1992), the concrete actions of many *kastom* political leaders have been geared not toward simple resistance but rather to finding resolutions to this dilemma.

This ambivalence is an important reason why compensation claims against the government receive such wide support. They unite Kwaio at opposite ends of the political spectrum by appealing to both those favoring more radical confrontation with, or rejection of, the government, and those who advocate reconciliation and cooperation. Most Kwaio, in fact, maintain sympathies with both positions, and the scenario of a compensation claim offers them a means to pursue both ends concurrently without apparent inconsistency.

The desire for more cooperative ties with the government was evident in public statements Kwaio made at the time of even the most confrontational claim led by Folofo'u. Early radio reports stressed that Kwaio representatives were demanding not only compensation, but also that the government pay more attention to Kwaio problems and give them more government representation (SIBC radio, 6–9 Nov 1984). During a meeting at that time with the prime minister about the compensation, the president of the Kwaio Fadanga told a story about a father who banished his true son and adopted another. The adopted son was treated well while the true son lived a poor, lonely life. Every time the true son tried to come home he was banished again. The president then asked the prime minister, "You have adopted the ways and thinking of the white people and now the true son is standing before you, why do you keep banishing him?" The desire for at least partial reconciliation also underlies Ma'aa-namea's statement, which exhibits a willingness to coexist with the government and its laws. That these Kwaio claims amount to more than meets the eye will surprise no one familiar with compensation in Melanesia, where claims are commonly employed to broach broader issues dividing groups.

The Kwaio compensation demands are not the only ones that Malaitans have made on the Solomons government in recent years. Most promi-

nently, the national government in 1989 agreed to pay S1\$200,000 (about US\$65,000) to compensate Malaita's entire population for an obscene anti-Malaitan sign in the Honiara market, supposedly placed there by Polynesians from Bellona. The payment, extorted by thousands of Malaitan men (relatively few of whom were Kwaio) marching and in some cases rioting and looting in Honiara's streets, was divided among Malaita's area councils. Several Malaitan leaders, including at least one parliamentarian, were prime instigators of the action.

In 1996 Honiara shook again as Malaitans demonstrated in the streets and then looted Chinese stores. This time they were demanding that the government compensate them for curses made against Malaita by Reef Islanders at a Honiara nightclub. After several days of high tension, well-organized petrol-bomb manufacture, and threats to burn Honiara to the ground, the government once more capitulated. Money was paid from the country's Community Development Fund to both the Malaitan and Reef



PHOTO 2. John Fiisango (smiling, on right), Member of Parliament for East Kwaio, formally accepts compensation on behalf of Malaita from his Reef Island counterpart, Michael Maina, on 2 February 1996. (Courtesy of *Solomon Star*)

factions (the latter received a smaller sum for a retaliatory Malaitan curse) (photo 2). Protesters cited the 1989 compensation as precedent, and this scenario will likely be replayed, perhaps with tragic consequences.

When compensation extends into the complexities of national politics, analysis becomes more challenging. While an in-depth assessment of the Honiara compensations is far beyond the scope of this paper, I shall close by briefly noting similarities they share with the Kwaio claims. These episodes cannot be understood at face value any more than can the Bell compensation claims. Many factors were involved, including ethnic tensions, rampant urban unemployment, and a growing "rascal" (youth crime) subculture in Honiara (see Jourdan 1995). Underlying them all, however, is enduring Malaitan discontent with government behavior, much of it rooted in the same politico-historical processes I have described here. The 1996 riots began as a march on government offices, and violence and looting erupted only when riot police blocked marchers from entering the main downtown area. For many of those involved, the action was a political demonstration, but, because the protest crystallized around the scenario of a compensation demand, violence probably was inevitable once police stopped the claim presentation. It should be noted too, that for some younger men the event was an excuse to wreak havoc. Yet such motivations are difficult to disentangle from the growing frustrations of unemployed youths in Honiara, who typically blame the government for their situation. Of course many Malaitans, even some with very strong anti-government political ideas, stongly opposed and condemned the violence.

In a formal "peace ceremony" where the compensations were paid out, Maenaa'adi, a Kwaio pagan leader engaged in the negotiations (but not in the street action) was invited to speak as a "custom chief." After voicing complaints that many Malaitans have against the government, he linked the riots to the degeneration of Honiara culture, citing the ubiquity of alcohol, nightclubbing, and violent movies: "Who is responsible for bringing all these things here?" he asked rhetorically. "The government of course, so it has to be held responsible for the problems associated with it" (*Solomon Star*, 2 Feb 1996). The subtext of these statements was a contrasting of the government, mired in decadence, with the moral superiority of Malaitan *kastom*.

Maenaa'adi and many of the protesters creatively applied Malaitan liability principles (in ways that some other Malaitans privately rejected as

specious) to justify the compensation demands: just as Malaitan feast-givers, to use our previous example, are liable for misfortunes befalling those who attend the social events they create, so too the government is liable for trouble that occurs in Honiara because the town is a government creation. "If the government had not built Honiara, young men would not be drawn there and problems such as those that sparked the curses would not occur" (Maenaa'adi 1996 personal communication).

Just as Kwaio are seeking more than monetary payment in their compensation claims for the punitive expedition, deeper political issues underlie the actions of the Malaitans in Honiara. The Solomons government currently suffers from what Robert Gordon and Mervyn Meggitt described for Papua New Guinea in the mid-1980s as a "crisis of internal legitimacy" (1985, 190–209). This is most notable among rural people, who make up the vast majority of Solomon Islanders. Conspicuous declines in the economy and infrastructure, combined with rife political corruption, lead many to advocate alternative means of governing the nation, or at least their own areas. This is particularly so on Malaita with its long history of antigovernment sentiments and movements.

Among Malaitans, as in Papua New Guinea, legal issues are central to the critique of government (Gordon and Meggitt 1985). But, unlike Papua New Guinea, law has not come to the political fore for Malaitans because of a radical breakdown of law and order, although crime is a problem in Honiara. For Malaitans (and to various degrees other Solomon Islanders) the underlying debate is one of defining terms on which to base future government, and a central issue is the extent to which they will control their own island. For many, these questions have always been first and foremost a struggle between "government law" and "*kastom* law."

The antigovernment emphasis of Malaitan *kastom* ideologies differentiates them from those where *kastom* is employed as a more subtle form of politico-economic enclavement (eg, Foster 1995a) or as a less contentious mediation of old and new ways (eg, White 1991; 1993). *Kastom* has played similar roles to these on Malaita, of course (eg, Akin nd). There, as everywhere, *kastom* is an extremely multivalent concept that exhibits significant variation both within and between different parts of the island. Malaita is far from united politically, and divergent models of *kastom* are as often used to highlight atomism as solidarity. Furthermore, young

Malaitans living abroad, including many who rioted in Honiara, are busily reshaping *kastom* to suit their urban lives, sometimes in ways that diminish their elders' control over them (see Jourdan 1995). Nevertheless, for most Malaitans, *kastom* as ideology has never completely lost its antigovernment grounding, and for many this common theme is returning to the fore as dissatisfaction with the state grows. Their shared discontent is what has inspired normally rivalrous Malaitans to undertake highly coordinated actions on Honiara's streets. In some other parts of the Solomons, too, with increasing political disillusionment, *kastom* politics is exhibiting a more oppositional character.

Ironically, this rise in the antigovernment tone of *kastom* politics is occurring at the same time as elements within the government are attempting to elevate *kastom*'s role, both within government policy and as a basis of what has thus far been an elusive, shared ideology for nation making (Foster 1995b). Even compensation is being employed as a national symbol. For example, in 1994, the government formally accepted a compensation of S1\$1.5 million from Papua New Guinea for deaths and destruction suffered in border incursions during the Bougainville crisis. At a leaf "chief's house" on the National Museum grounds, Solomons Prime Minister Saemala ceremonially reciprocated with pigs, shell money, and betel nuts "in the true spirit of Melanesian brotherhood" (*Solomon Star*, 16 and 23 Mar). Yet relative to Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, colonial and postcolonial Solomon Islands governments have historically been less sympathetic to *kastom*. Their reluctance to legitimate *kastom* reflects several factors, including the tremendous influence of Christian churches in the country, and also government trepidation concerning *kastom*'s rebellious roots in Maasina Rule and subsequent revolutionary movements. Government disregard for *kastom* has, not surprisingly, only increased its salience as a basis for resistance ideologies. Now that government officials are attempting to promote *kastom* as a national symbol, they, like all who attempt to tame liberation imagery for nationalistic purposes, risk strengthening forces that remain essentially antigovernment in the eyes of many citizens (see also Frye 1996; Lindstrom 1997).

There are conflicts over this issue within the government itself, particularly regarding legal matters. The Solomons political field has been complicated by what Frazer recently noted in this journal as "a de facto shift in power and administrative authority from public servants to politi-

cians" (1997, 41). Law-enforcement officials have tended to be protective of the western-based legal system, while politicians have been more responsive, in both rhetoric and practice, to constituent calls for the strengthening of *kastom* law (see Steeves 1996, 133). For instance, in one 1990 case, two Malaitan parliamentarians engineered the release from prison of an already-sentenced Kwara'ae murderer after the family of his Kwaio victim (the son of Wa'ifurina, quoted earlier) received death compensation from the killer's kin (see Kwa'ioloa and Burt 1997, 144-155). Since then, police officials have been at pains to see that this does not recur, while many Malaitans, including elected officials, push for similar resolutions of other murder and assault cases. Within Honiara itself a Malaitan "Council of Chiefs," supported by politicians, hears disputes involving Malaitans to the exclusion of government courts, despite police demands that they cease their activities (*Solomon Star*, 24 Nov 1993). These controversies are, of course, as much battles over the distribution of power in the country as they are about specific crimes and punishments.

The situation is further complicated because many public servants (a very large number of whom are Malaitans) are themselves sympathetic toward *kastom* political ideas and increasingly ambivalent about the government in which they serve. It is a serious error to always perceive pro-*kastom* statements by state officials as no more than insincere manipulations by westernized elites (compare Philibert 1986).

The political message that Malaitans delivered in Honiara's streets was not only one of dissatisfaction with the government, but also one of defiance of government control over their island and their affairs. With the steady rise of corruption, and growing public disgust with all aspects of government mismanagement, many Malaitans sense the weakening of an old adversary. The riots conveyed this powerfully in a dual manner. By using force to compel the government and its soldiers to back down in Honiara, they demonstrated that the government does not possess the legal or coercive power to dictate Malaitan behavior, even on its own turf. Further, they compelled the government to pay compensation, a key symbol of Malaitan *kastom* law, political power, and autonomy. For the men involved in the Honiara riots, as for the Kwaio pursuing the Bell compensation, the idea of forcing the government itself to pay compensation to Malaitans is a compelling one that is not likely to vanish soon.

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Notes

1 One tends to describe these Melanesians as treating the government "as if" it were a rival kin group. But to the degree that government positions and power are distributed through personal or *wantok* connections, government and kin-based identities may indeed overlap, particularly within local-level politics. This is especially glaring for groups like the mountain Kwaio with no one in government positions (see Gewertz and Errington 1991, 190).

2 For discussion of *kastom* ideologies and politics in Kwaio and the Solomons more generally see Akin (1993, 1996); Burt (1994); Keesing (1992); and White (1993).

3 For more detailed analyses of these events see Akin (1993, 431-589), Fifi'i (1989, 151-166), and Keesing (1990; 1992, 156-172, 190-195). Fifi'i presented much valuable information and keen insights, but his account, also relied on heavily by Keesing, should be read with caution: he and Folofo'u were vehement political enemies.

4 Be cautioned that, although Kwaio sometimes distinguish "affairs of ancestors" from "affairs of living people," and do so clearly here, concepts of "sacred" and "secular" as distinct realms fit uncomfortably with broader Kwaio conceptions of the world.

5 For a detailed analysis of the native court system and the discontents it generated, and the consequent emergence of the *kastom* concept on Malaita, see Akin (1993, 170-430).

6 Contra Fifi'i (1989, 156-157), this was strongly supported by mountain pagans and also by many coastal Christians.

7 Ma'aanamae grew up in Basiana's hamlet and was taught by him as a boy. The prominence of legal issues in Kwaio conceptions of the government is apparent when "law" (*loa*) becomes an alternative label for the state generally, as here and in Ruita's claim quoted earlier.

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Abstract

As Melanesian countries enter their third decade of independence, diverse local communities are seeking to transform their status in relation to the state. Many are attempting to frame their interactions with government in terms of indigenous cultural models that presume social equivalence. When thus applied, these models themselves acquire new meanings. This paper explores this process in relation to ideas about compensation among Malaitans in the Solomon Islands who have since independence pressed several claims against the central government. The focus is on a series of claims made by Kwaio people, beginning in the 1980s, regarding crimes of a 1927 punitive expedition that followed the assassination of a district officer and his party. Ethnographic, historical, and political analyses are combined to explain why Kwaio find this compensation demand such an appealing way to approach the government. The case also illuminates violent compensation riots that rocked the capital, Honiara, in 1989 and 1996.

KEYWORDS: compensation, identity, *kastom*, Kwaio, Malaita, Solomon Islands, urban violence